

REVISIONES

JORGE JULIÁN
ARISTIZÁBAL

Almost All Together



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Gallery B and The Foundry

In his book *History of Beauty* Umberto Eco reminds us that art has the ability to represent both physical and moral ugliness in a beautiful way. In religious painting since the Middle Ages, for example, artists applied their mastery both to narrate biblical passages that glorified the Christian God or His passion (the beautiful), as well as to warn followers of the horrific consequences of failing to obey His commands (the ugly). "The ugly becomes acceptable and even pleasant in the kind of art that 'beautifully' expresses and denounces the ugliness of the ugly," says Eco. As such, beauty is not a varnish that neutralizes the grotesque but rather a visually suggestive means of conveying physically or morally reprehensible content.

Jorge Julián Aristizábal (Medellín, 1962) is an artist whose prolific career escapes easy categorizations. While painting and drawing are his primary media, he also incorporates a series of conceptual operations that often call into question the topics he approaches with irony and subtlety (politics, clichés, popular culture, the effect of the media on information processing) as well as the very foundations of art in general and painting in particular, including artistic techniques, the idea of appropriation and the use of color, amongst others.

Executed with technical skill and exquisite taste, Aristizábal's drawings, watercolors, paintings and sculptures appeal to beauty in order to question, expose and remind us of some of the less sublime aspects of human experience, from the repression or exacerbation of our desires and frustrations to the aberrations that spark from the exercise of power and politics. In his work, beauty is not an end in itself but rather, it is implemented in the tradition

of the representation of “the ugly” as a strategy of seduction. Once it has begun to perform its task—once the work has attained the viewer’s attention—it allows to address the topics that Eco categorizes as “ugly,” but that are often also profoundly human.

When the pieces of the series “Penetration” have seduced the audience with their shapes and colors, for example, they put forth a dilemma: to concede or not to the provocation generated by the title of the series and the images of a little bird poking its head through a hole. Upon a second look at the small paintings, viewers are invited to take part in a game with no overt rules and in which they must decide to what extent they will allow themselves to be guided by the artist or by their own associations.

Aristizábal’s work may be divided into two main periods. The first revolves around a predominantly bidimensional practice in which he delves into intimate topics with a personal and sometimes hermetic vocabulary. Pieces like *Homenaje a J.P. (Homage to J.P.)* and *En octubre te amaré (In October I Will Love You)*, both from the early 1990s, belong to this period. In them and in other works from that decade, the artist refers to acts, concerns and situations that for various reasons could not be made public. During these years art was a therapeutic and cathartic space for Aristizábal where the limitations imposed by a conservative society on thought and on life are acknowledged, along with the communicative possibilities of art.

In the same vein is the large-format painting *Almost All Together* (1999) which lends this exhibition its title. It explores the psychology of the artist and of the human mind in general through a world of fantasy replete with eroticism. Surrealist in both form and content, it is a representation of all suppressed thoughts and passions in which desires and frustrations become visible through symbolic forms that inhabit the artist’s subconscious.

The master’s he began in 1999 at Goldsmiths, University of London, marks the beginning of the second period in which his interest in drawing and painting is reaffirmed but new styles, techniques and references including installation and sculpture are also explored (*Fatiga*, 2000). It is at this point that several of the concerns his work is mostly identified with today begin to consolidate, particularly the productive and at times complex combination of the personal and the political.

In the early 2000s Aristizábal produced one of his best-known projects: a series of 22 paintings based on the stickers included in the wrappers of Jet brand chocolates and that consumers collect in the album provided by the company. The images, translated to oil and an exaggerated scale in regards to the original, make use of an iconic object from Colombian popular culture to offer a perspective on the environment in which the artist carries out his work. Rooted in the country's prolific tradition of pop art, this series of paintings provides a mundane antithesis to his more intimate pieces or, on the contrary, to his studies on national politics.

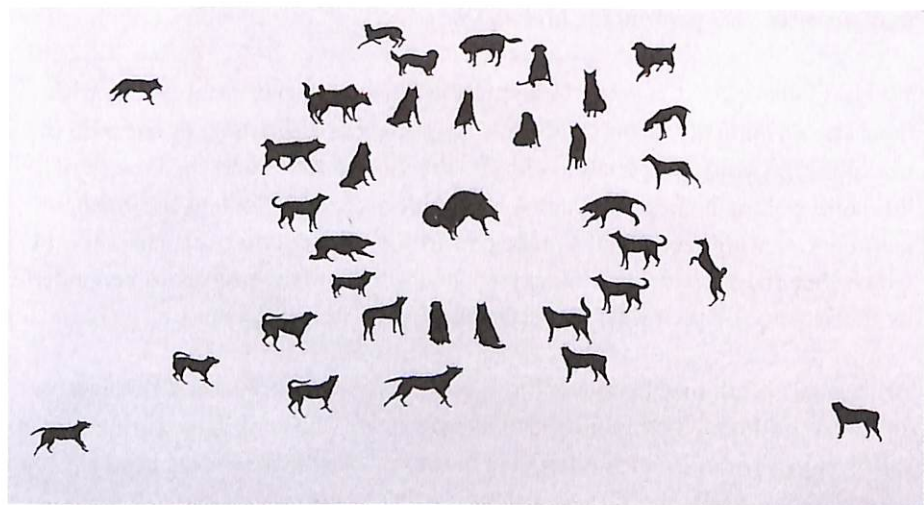
This convergence of universes is visible in series like "Invisible Wounds" or "Slogans" in which the artist uses personal vocabularies to develop partially hermetic narratives, and in which, nevertheless, elements from his domestic, family, social and national environments are incorporated.

In recent years, Aristizábal has focused on analyzing and questioning Colombian politics and the way that mass media handles information. For example, his series "Color Press" consists of political newspaper articles of national importance that are altered with acrylic paint and that demonstrate the permeability and complexity of the Colombian sociopolitical system. By eliminating the specificity of each case (through the erasing of faces and homogenization of characters) Aristizábal gives viewers the opportunity to assign their own experiences and perspectives to the topic in question, thereby encouraging a critical analysis of the information.

Perhaps one of his most ambitious projects is the series entitled "Scandals." In it Aristizábal depicts some of the most serious cases of injustice, corruption and negligence that have unfolded in the Colombian political system in recent decades. *Proceso 8000*, for example, provides a wealth of details on the judicial process launched against former Colombian president Ernesto Samper following accusations that his presidential campaign was financed by the illegal drug trade; while *Falsos positivos* summarizes the discoveries made at the end of 2006 concerning the involvement of the military and the Colombian government in the assassination of innocent civilians who were then passed off as guerrilla fighters killed in combat in the war on armed insurgent groups.

Jorge Julián Aristizábal. Almost All Together is the first anthological exhibition of the work by the *Antioqueño* artist and brings together pieces from throughout his career, from the symbolic and personal paintings of the 1990s, to his well-known series of canvases depicting the images of Jet brand chocolates and his subtle games involving language and eroticism to his most recent and incisive work addressing Colombian politics and idiosyncrasy, as well as experimentations with sculpture and installation. The exhibit is part of the *Revisiones* series, a segment of MAMM's exhibition program which strives to offer a spectrum of the work of some of the most relevant Colombian mid-career artists of today.

Far from beautifying the ugly, the work of Aristizábal instrumentalizes beauty to take us to darker places including our desires and frustrations, culture or that which we create collectively, the often-dirty structure of power and politics and the state of society today. *Jorge Julián Aristizábal. Almost All Together* aims to reveal not only a body of work that is formally sophisticated and thematically urgent but also how the production and consumption of art can help us understand our demons and those of others.



Jorge Julián Aristizábal, *Do You Know Where Your Dog Is Right Now?*, 1999. Acrylic on paper. Collection Medellín Museum of Modern Art

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